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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 002206

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [TU](#) [OSCE](#)

SUBJECT: MFA BLOCKING PURCHASE OF ABANDONED CHURCH

REF: A. ANKARA 2097

[1](#)B. ANKARA 2061

Classified by Polcouns John Kunstadter; reasons 1.4 b and d.

[1](#)1. (U) Summary: An American pastor and his wife operate a Protestant "cultural center" in the Mediterranean tourist city of Antalya. Although their work is primarily religious, they hold work permits as owners of the company that runs the center, which includes a cafe and a room where community activities are held. They face less difficulty than Protestants in larger cities like Istanbul and Ankara, but the MFA has been blocking their efforts to purchase an abandoned Greek Orthodox church for the past four years. End Summary.

AMCITs Come to Turkey to Preach

[1](#)2. (U) James and Renata Bultema came to Turkey in 1990, attracted by the opportunity to live overseas and serve a minority Christian community in a Muslim country. James, who studied theology in Denver, started as a pastor at Union Church in Istanbul. At first, the Bultemas viewed their time in Turkey as a temporary, short-term mission, after which they would return to the U.S. But when they stumbled across an opportunity to open their own church in the Mediterranean city of Antalya, they jumped at it.

[1](#)3. (U) The Bultemas have been relatively successful in negotiating the bureaucratic obstacles faced by religious minorities seeking to worship in Turkey. They have established a private company that enables them to reside permanently in Turkey, and have formed a church "association." But for the past four years authorities have blocked their efforts to purchase an abandoned Greek Orthodox church.

[1](#)4. (U) Each church in Turkey has a different story. Turkish laws and regulations provide no clear avenue for religious denominations that want to open places of worship. National and local authorities can be relatively flexible or rigid, depending on factors such as the location of the church, its religious denomination, the number of Turkish converts attending the church, and whether church members perform missionary work. Each church in operation today has its own, unique strategy for dealing with the GOT. The Bultemas' story provides one example; reftel A provides another, very different example.

Couple Opens Center in Antalya

[1](#)5. (U) The Bultemas, who met with us April 13 in Ankara, said they had just about grown tired of Istanbul life when in 1996 they noticed an ad by the International Women's Association of Antalya. According to the ad, the international community in Antalya wanted to establish a church and needed a pastor. The Bultemas replied immediately. They began work in Antalya by holding congregations in hotels. They informed the Governor's office in advance of each meeting, and plainclothes police would attend the sessions. In 1997, the police informed them they needed to find a permanent location.

[1](#)6. (U) They purchased land next to a small, abandoned Greek Orthodox church. In November 1999 they opened the St. Paul Cultural Center at the site. The Center features a cafe and a 100-capacity multi-purpose room used for a range of activities including dance and aerobics classes, English conversation clubs, concerts and seminars, and playgroups for toddlers. On Sundays, the Bultemas hold an English-language service and a group of Turkish Protestants rents the facility for a Turkish-language service. A group of German expatriates also used to rent the facility before opening their own center nearby. Officially, the Bultemas are businesspeople operating the company that runs the Center. They hold work permits as owners of the company.

[1](#)7. (U) James said operating as a businessman has been awkward and sometimes frustrating. He is thinking about applying for a work permit as a pastor, although he is not optimistic that the government would approve such an application. Still, the

Bultemas realize that by moving to the international tourist town of Antalya they have avoided the kind of intimidation and harassment often experienced by Protestants in cities like Istanbul and Ankara. There have been no protests in front of their Center, no broken windows, and only a few slanderous press stories.

18. (U) The only problem with local authorities came in April 2002, when police advised the Bultemas to take down their signs because the Center is not zoned as a place of worship. Parliament had recently adopted legislation designed to make it possible for Christians and other religious minorities to acquire zoning approval to build places of worship. However, local authorities in many areas instead used the legislation as a means to challenge the legality of existing churches. The Bultemas sensed that the police, who have generally been supportive, were not serious. They ignored them, and the issue was never revisited.

MFA Blocking Purchase of Church

19. (U) The Bultemas' biggest frustration has been their inability to buy the Greek Orthodox church, a goal they have pursued since purchasing the adjacent property. The Turkish owner has been anxious to sell since the beginning -- back in 2001 he and the Bultemas agreed on a price of USD 70,000. Then, on the day they were to close the deal, the local director of the titles and deeds department said the purchase required approval from Ankara. Now, more than four years later, the Bultemas are still waiting for that approval.

10. (U) Under pressure from German Government lobbying in support of German expatriates, the GOT sent a group of high-level bureaucrats to Antalya in 2003 to meet with Protestants. The bureaucrats advised the Protestants to take advantage of recent amendments to the Associations Law and form church associations. They told the Bultemas that association status would facilitate their purchase of the church. They took the advice, and even won a battle to keep the word "church" in their association title. But the purchase remains blocked. The latest news came on April 12, when an official from the MFA Real Estate Department told James the MFA is still gathering information needed to make a decision.

11. (U) GOT officials have told the Bultemas' attorney they are investigating how the church came into private ownership, and whether the transfer was legal. The church passed into Turkish ownership in 1954, during a period of conflict between Muslims and Greek Orthodox; the Bultemas note that the Greek Orthodox owner most likely fled the country. The original Turkish owner has died, and the property now belongs to his daughters and son in law. The Bultemas say their attorney has confirmed the authenticity of the deed.

12. (U) While the MFA reviews the purchase application, the church falls into greater disrepair year by year. "The building is collapsing. It will eventually fall down," James said.

Comment

13. (C) The Bultemas are the type of Christians the GOT finds easiest to tolerate. They are foreigners catering primarily to other foreigners, rather than Turkish converts to Christianity. They do not organize bible distributions or other missionary activities. They are located in a cosmopolitan tourist city.

14. (C) However, GOT authorities are clearly wary of their plans to buy and restore the Greek Orthodox church. Allowing the Bultemas to conduct services in a traditional church building, it seems, would raise the profile of the church too high in the eyes of the authorities. GOT leaders often boast of Turkey's historic religious tolerance and diversity. As reported refetel B, FM Gul recently denied the existence of religious prejudice in Turkey by asserting that, "Turkey is a place where churches and synagogues are built near mosques." Unfortunately, however, the Bultemas' experience is not unique -- Christians and other religious minorities routinely face bureaucratic obstructionism when they seek to build or restore places of worship. The Turks, it appears, prefer their churches in ruins, rather than restored and filled with congregants.

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